Overlapping chat: Lesson activity

Getting some data
The best way to encounter e-language and get data to use in the classroom is to encourage your students to provide it themselves. This can be done in the classroom if there is enough computer provision, but it is probably better done as a fun alternative (or addition!) to homework. Set up a chat room for your students, or better still, have one of them do it for you. There are many different platforms that can work:

- Popular social media such as Facebook or local equivalents that have a group chat facility are a good choice, as groups can be created easily and quickly and your students may all be members of a particular site already, so they won’t need to make new accounts.

- There are many other online chat options too: recently I’ve been using tlk.io, a really easy to use chat platform that allows you to create a room and share it with your students, who can join in without having to log in or create an account.

- Whatsapp is another good option, especially as it has a really convenient option to email a whole chat to yourself, so you can turn it into class materials really easily. Whatsapp has a computer desktop version that is easy to use too. Whatsapp requires that students share their phone numbers, so check that they’re ok with that.

- Skype is another possibility. It doesn’t have an ‘export’ feature like Whatsapp, but it’s easy to use copy/paste to transfer a chat to a text document.

- Bear in mind that there is a big difference between mobile messaging (two thumbs!) and chatting at a computer (ten fingers!), and that whatever platform you use, make sure everyone is using the same kind of device, otherwise participation may not be equal.

Make a date for your students to go online and spend a while chatting together. You might want to encourage them to talk about particular topics that you’ve covered recently in class, or just leave them to it to see what they talk about. It doesn’t have to be very long – half an hour should be plenty.
**Materials Preparation**
When the chat is finished, you’ll want to find a way to turn the chat log into class materials. This is where Whatsapp has a huge advantage: you can just choose “email chat” in the chat options menu, and it sends you the whole chat as a text file, which you can easily edit on any word processing software like Microsoft Word. Other platforms make it more difficult, and you may need to use a bit of computer programming to put it together. Be sure to test the process first before you go ahead with a whole chat session and discover you can’t get the data you want!

**Classroom Procedure**
Print the chat transcript and take it into class. Have you students work in groups with one transcript between them. Using different coloured highlighters, have them mark the lines of the chat that go together.

As you monitor, encourage them to think about how they know which lines go together. Ask them to identify pairs of comments like question/answer or greeting/response, and to mark the words that link lines together, like “Chris/He”, “a lawyer/do for a living” etc.

Have the students cut up the transcript and physically put the lines of the different exchanges together. What problems do they encounter when they are doing this? Do they find they sometimes have to cut lines in half?

As a final stage you might want to have students verbally practice the exchanges they have put together.

**Follow-up Activity: Reorder the sentences**
The activity above is actually remarkably similar to a ‘jumbled sentences’ discourse awareness task. You might want students to move on to a more complex task putting the disordered sentences of a piece of text back into the correct order, using the same skills of reference and cohesion that they used to sort out the overlapping chat. Find a paragraph or two, suitable for the level of your students, write it out one sentence per line, then cut up the lines, mix them up, and have your students put them back in order!